

# Narratives

## Executive Summary

The Southern Minnesota Initiative Foundation's (SMIF) AmeriCorps LEAP (Learning Early Achieves Potential) Initiative will place 20 FTE members trained as social-emotional skill builders to assist at-risk preschoolers in 16 early childhood programs. At the end of the first program year, LEAP members will have helped 200 children ages 3-5 to demonstrate gains in social-emotional development as evidenced by the Teaching Strategies Gold Creative Curriculum scorecard, indicating their readiness for Kindergarten. In addition, the AmeriCorps LEAP members will leverage an additional 60 community volunteers to assist with monthly Family Fun Nights and service events.

The program will address the CNCS focus area of Education. The CNCS investment of \$233,315 will be matched with \$10,000 in ServeMinnesota Innovation state funds and \$315,588 in legal host cash and in-kind private match, for a total budget of \$558,903.

## Rationale and Approach/Program Design

### 1. Program Design

a. Problem / Need: Half of all Minnesota preschoolers enter Kindergarten unprepared to learn. The Minnesota Department of Education, 2010 Minnesota School Readiness Study, found that half of those entering Kindergarten were less than proficient in key domains of school readiness with the largest deficits found in the domain of social and emotional learning (SEL).

SEL includes skills such as taking turns, understanding and modulating emotions, and following rules. As such, it has the greatest impact on a child's early school experience. SEL skills prepare children for later school success by laying the foundation for self-regulation and executive function - the ability to focus and learn in Kindergarten. These skills form the basis of successful social interactions: making friends, managing conflict, and enjoying positive results that come with changing how they think and what they do. Children who do not have these skills can demonstrate disruptive, oppositional and unfocused behavior that diverts a teacher's attention from teaching, and thus impacts the whole class. In fact, a 2009 survey of Kindergarten teachers in the LEAP service area found SEL skills high on their wish-list for incoming students. As they said, "We need children to be socially and emotionally prepared so we can teach."

The healthy development of SEL skills in preschoolers is disrupted by "toxic stress." As noted in the

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1995 Adverse Child Environment Study (ACES), conducted by the Center for Disease Control and Kaiser Permanente, toxic stress is borne of chronic stressful conditions often beyond an individual's control, such as poverty, abuse and neglect. It disrupts normal childhood development, negatively impacting a child's social, emotional and cognitive development. Although stress is prevalent in all families, research shows that families experiencing poverty face greater challenges in preparing children for success in school. This was confirmed in the 2010 Minnesota School Readiness study, which found that more affluent students, those at 400% of federal poverty levels, were up to three times more likely to meet proficiency in school readiness domains than low-income students, whose household income was less than 250% of federal poverty levels.

Scientists have found that toxic stress can actually disrupt the architecture of the developing brain -- with lifelong results. By age 3 in normal child development, the emotional brain (amygdala -- stress triggers emotional responses) is just beginning to make connections with the thinking brain (prefrontal cortex -- calm regulates thought, emotions and actions). Since 90% of a child's brain is developed by age five, it is critical that each child receives the quality care, supportive relationships and positive, enriching experiences that maximize brain growth and neuron connections in the first five years of life.

Sadly, too many children do not receive these supports at home. Based on state Kindergarten-readiness rates, about half (26,500) of the 53,000 children ages 0-4 who live in Southern Minnesota will enter Kindergarten with social-emotional deficits that leave them unprepared for Kindergarten.

In the rural, 20-county region that we serve, prosperity has decreased, while poverty and related issues -- and resultant stress -- have risen. Over the last nine years, the median family income within LEAP's service area declined by 5% (Minnesota Compass 2010), from \$47,632 in 2009 to \$45,394 in 2010. At the same time, the Anne C. Casey Foundation's Minnesota Kids Count data (2013) reports that from 2007 to 2011 every county in our region saw an increase in the number of children living in poverty. Some 7% of local children live in extreme poverty (50% of the federal poverty level or \$11,000 per year for a family of four). One in five (19%) children receives SNAP assistance; more than a third (36%) receive free or reduced lunch at school. According to the 2013 Minnesota Children Defense Fund, half (86,000) of Minnesota's children living in poverty reside in greater Minnesota with 38% living within our region. Increasing poverty and resultant stress, need to work long hours, and

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family tension interfere with parents' capacity to bond with their children, and provide the positive interactions that foster SEL. Our region's neglect and abuse rates show 5.1% of young children experiencing this source of toxic stress impact on their developing brains.

The families we serve often experience multiple risk factors such as poverty, unemployment, low levels of parent education, Limited English Proficiency, and single/teen parents, often with histories of mental illness. Many parents are overwhelmed and unable to provide the nurturing, enriching environments offered by their more affluent peers. As a result, parents often cannot manage to plan and provide fun family outings, mother-child activities or even bedtime reading.

Their children often are left behind: with limited vocabulary, less reading, and fewer enriching experiences. In other words, these children have fewer experiences that research correlates to higher academic outcomes. Minnesota State Commission of Education Dr. Brenda Cassellius stated at the October 2013 Minnesota Education Professional Conference, "Increasingly, as children experience crisis in their family, or they have social or emotional issues, it's really important we address those issues in the classroom. If you can't think straight, it's really hard to learn."

b. AmeriCorps Members as Highly Effective Means to Solve Community Problems: The AmeriCorps LEAP Initiative's Theory of Change is that by helping preschoolers develop social and emotional skills, these children will develop the foundation for self-regulation and executive function that are crucial to school readiness and later academic success.

While most school readiness programs focus on preparing preschoolers with the early reading and numeracy skills needed for Kindergarten, LEAP has focused on the development of SEL skills, ages 3-5. We are building on an increasing body of evidence that correlates the acquisition of SEL skills to school and life success. The importance of doing this before these children enter Kindergarten is supported both by brain science (see "Evidence," below) and by economists such as Dr. Art Rolnick, who estimates the financial return to society on early investment is \$17 for every \$1 invested, calculated by lower government expenditures on societal supports and higher tax payments from more productive citizens.

What is unique about the LEAP Initiative is our express purpose of focusing on behaviors rather than

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academics. Teachers already have their hands full: they need to deliver increasingly rigorous lesson plans aligned to Common Core State Standards. Paraprofessionals keep classrooms of 18-20 preschoolers running smoothly, or assist children with Individual Education Plans. The LEAP member becomes a value-add to the classroom, available to work 1:1 with children who struggle: those who are challenged in adjusting to classroom structure, having a meltdown over sharing a toy or arriving at school feeling anxious or sad because they missed mom's hug goodbye as they scrambled onto the bus. These issues divert teachers' energies from engaging children in instructional activity to enforcing classroom order and discipline. LEAP members prevent disruptions with proactive strategies that respectfully redirect, distract, and "teach in the moment" so the classroom stays calm and children stay focused.

SMIF trains 20 FTE members to observe and assist in preschool classrooms developing skills required in the social-emotional school readiness domain for at-risk preschoolers. Following best practices identified by the Collaborative for Academic, Social and Emotional Learning (CASEL), members are trained to model, support and reward five social and emotional competencies that promote school readiness: Self Awareness, Self Management, Social Awareness, Relationship Skills, and Responsible Decision Making.

Members work alongside teachers daily over nine months to provide real-time behavioral interventions and leverage teachable moments. They act as skills advocates, teaching children proven strategies that are developmentally appropriate and immediately helpful in self-soothing, controlling impulses and identifying and regulating emotions. Members reinforce teacher's daily lessons and class rules while modeling positive behaviors, such as using positive words and constructive problem-solving. They observe behaviors, take notes, and demonstrate strategies using tools that preschoolers understand and relate to, including cue cards, puppets, books and dramatic play.

For example, members teach the Turtle Technique using a puppet, Tucker the Turtle, to demonstrate an effective response to an upset: Stop, tuck your head in and breathe, stretch back out and think of a solution. This proven teaching tool, developed by Technical Assistance Center on Social Emotional Intervention(TACSEI) for Young Children, helps preschoolers to take the time they need to quiet down, gather their emotions, and think through a solution. Members teach children to identify feelings using the "This is how I feel today" pictorial description of 10 emotional states, and use visual

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cue cards to help them identify effective strategies to address the emotions that arise in specific classroom situations. For example, if a child is getting angry while playing, the visual cue cards provide options such as "Tucker the Turtle" or "Say, 'Please stop!'"

Another TASCEI strategy is a framework that uses caring relationships between adults and children to build skills in a high-quality classroom environment. Members model and practice caring and supportive relationships with the children, but also create opportunities for parents/community members to sustain this role. Members plan monthly Family Fun Nights and provide family reading activities 6 times a year as a way to promote bonding over literacy and the enrichment activities that research has proven to correlate to school success.

Other member strategies include using journals to record observations of what children do, on their own, that helps a friend or resolves a conflict using words. The journals have been called the "good friend or good heart" journals; some members call them their "gratitude journal," but the process is the same. Each week a child is recognized for something he or she did that was positive or connected to a skill the member is focusing on. At the end of the week, at the end of the day, members share something they are grateful for from the journal. It is a way to recognize each child at some point in the school year acting with kindness or being helpful with friends.

Using the CASEL-approved MindUP curriculum, members will add mindful awareness, listening, yoga breathing and animal poses to their toolbox. MindUP is the Hawn Foundation's signature, evidence-based educational program which teaches a set of social, emotional, and self-regulatory strategies and skills to cultivate wellbeing and emotional balance. These strategies are imbedded within the Circle Time component at the start of each school day, after recess or lunch, and at dismissal. Children are taught how to calm their emotions through deep belly breathing and attentive listening. MindUP helps children to reduce stress and anxiety, improve concentration, and gain greater self-awareness which increases optimism, gratitude and self-control. In Paul Tough's book, *How Children Succeed* (2012), these were three of the seven character strengths researchers identified as predictive of success in school and life.

Together, TASCEI and MindUP techniques provide members with tools that help children build skills in self-regulation and executive function.

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Members are trained to administer the Teaching Strategies Gold Assessment to determine children's progress in 36 social-emotional indicators tied to school readiness at key benchmarks in the service year. Children progress along a continuum that enables them to make gains toward meeting these widely recognized standards. This assessment is part of the Creative Curriculum, an award-winning preschool curriculum used at Head Start programs nationwide and used at a majority of our partner sites. It aligns to Head Start Child Development learning standards and helps to support the educational portion of our partners' work.

Evidence Base: LEAP tools, strategies and activities are based on TACSEI and MindUP programs, which have been vetted and approved by CASEL, the pre-eminent organization advancing research, practice and public policy on SEL competence.

In 2013, CASEL gave special designation to programs that provide explicit SEL skill instruction and instructional practices. Determinations are made by CASEL's Research Advisory Group, a cross-discipline collaboration of some of the best-known thought leaders in the field of education and youth development, including Linda Darling-Hammond, Stanford University and Angela Lee Duckworth, University of Pennsylvania. The techniques and strategies CASEL approves, which LEAP employs, were reviewed by trained researchers who studied program evaluations and conducted their own investigation and interviews of program providers.

The correlation between emotional development, brain science and academic learning was supported in the ground-breaking Board of Children, Youth and Families Institute of Medicine study (2000), "From Neurons to Neighborhoods: The Science of Early Childhood Development." It concluded that children were born wired for feelings and ready to learn; that early environments matter and nurturing relationships are essential; and that interactions among early childhood science policy and practice demand dramatic rethinking.

These findings have transformed the field of early childhood development. We now know that by the time a child enters preschool at age 3, the emotional and thinking brain are in critical stages of development and neural pathways are being formed that will structurally effect what's possible for the child through adulthood. We know that 90% of the brain is developed by age 5. We have a critical

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window of opportunity when the continued development of responsive interaction between adult and child can lessen deficiencies, open new neural pathways, and provide children with the skills they need to reach their full potential.

For example, Jack Shonkoff, Director of the Center for Developing Children at Harvard University, found that the quality of a mother's positive responsiveness to her baby through cooing, singing, smiling provides the "serve and return" needed for the child's healthy brain development. If secure attachment and responsive relationships are inconsistent or missing in the child's first three years, the size of the child's brain and complexity of neural pathways do not develop to potential. LEAP members provide the positive, responsive, consistent adult relationships within this critical time frame in which science indicates that deficiencies can be ameliorated and SEL capacity expanded.

The 1995 US Centers for Disease Control's Adverse Child Environments (ACES) study is further evidence that stress negatively impacts brain development. Stressful experiences trigger an automatic biological response that floods the pre-frontal cortex with cortisol and adrenaline. This flood reduces or stops thinking capacity and allows for quick instinctive, protective action. Frequent stress has long-term impact damaging neuron development. The study shows that ACES connected to long-term developmental issues include recurrent emotional, alcohol or drug abuse, an incarcerated, chronically depressed or mentally ill household member, family violence, emotional or physical neglect.

The MindUP curriculum offers a promising strategy for combating ACES and the resultant toxic stress. Its development was based on research connecting neuroscience, mindful awareness, SEL and positive psychology. Among the studies of its effectiveness was a five-month MindUP pilot (2011) at J. Erick Jonsson Community School in Dallas. Researchers assembled a cohort of 225 low-to-moderate income families with children PreK-Grade 10. After five months of MindUP, 58% of students demonstrated a positive SEL gain in Empathy, Perspective Taking, Mindfulness, Optimism, Emotional Control and Decision making.

Finally, research by the Search Institute, CASEL and innumerable researchers indicates that the involvement of caring adults positively influences SEL, academic achievement and pro-social behaviors throughout a child's life.

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c. Member Training: 3-day late August orientation retreat prior to engagement at sites:

Day 1: Path to service, national service history, program expectations, prohibited activities, performance measures, data collection, OnCorps timesheet and reflection reporting; time management strategies, project planning, leadership and team-building exercises.

Day 2: MindUP and TASCEI tool training, SEL school readiness skills, brain workshop entitled "Emotional Intelligence: Adults Preparing to Nurture Children's Brains by Developing their Own."

Child observation techniques, implementing strategies within a preschool classroom day and administering child assessments. Day 3: "Reading Rocks!", a six-book series given to each child to encourage routine home reading. Members learn the value and impact reading aloud has on strengthening bonds between child and adult, its calming effect and result of increasing early literacy/word awareness. Members practice reading children's books to develop engaging reading styles. Members brainstorm book activities and strategies to engage parents.

September: After the retreat, members attend site in-service orientation prior to school start. Site orientation is verified through a checklist signed by member and site supervisor. Members begin a 30-day in-class observation period to connect the content of LEAP orientation with hands-on delivery in the classroom. Members begin relationships with staff and children; take notes on child observations, and get familiar with classroom schedule and culture. Children are identified for assessments at this time.

Monthly Corps: Begin in September for member connection, training on disability awareness, communication, conflict resolution, and volunteer recruitment. Meetings always include teambuilding, best practice, planning component and reflection.

Mid-year: In February members convene for a two-day retreat for rejuvenation, performance measure review, and "Life after AmeriCorps" mentor/coaching sessions preparation.

Prohibited activities are reviewed with members, and volunteers members recruit, throughout the service term as needed.

d. Member Supervision: Site supervisors usually are either the site Executive Director or Mental Health Specialist - the same person who supervises classroom teachers. The Site Supervisor monitors

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members' effectiveness building relationships with children and teachers, and implementing strategies to move children toward SEL goals. Site Supervisors signs off on timesheets, provide coaching, and evaluate members.

Members serve side-by-side with teachers during the school day. At 60 days, teachers assess member's performance using the Classroom Assessment Scoring System (CLASS) teacher evaluations used by the State of Minnesota to evaluate SEL instruction. Content feedback is shared with the member to set goals to develop members' SEL instruction. CLASS is administered monthly until the member achieves a 4-5 level of instruction.

Across program sites, members are supervised by the Program Director. To ensure that the program is implemented with fidelity, the Program Director conducts site visits each year within the first 60 days of service placement and mid-year. The Program Director facilitates a Site Supervisor Learning Network to share best practice and solicit feedback for continuous improvement.

e. Commitment to AmeriCorps Identification: Members learn about national service at orientation. They are required to wear logo identifying AmeriCorps gear, including t-shirts, pins and lanyards with identification tags. Each site location displays AmeriCorps signage. Sites introduce members within local early childhood networks to expand members' professional network and make connections for member volunteer recruitment. Members stay connected to the national service movement through service events which are coordinated through Minnesota's InterCorps Council leadership. Members practice public speaking skills at Corps meetings to prepare for civic presentations. SMIF publicizes LEAP events via press outlets, emails and social media.

### **Organizational Capability**

#### 3. Organizational Capability

a. Organizational Background and Staffing: SMIF has the experience, staffing and management to plan and implement the LEAP program having successfully implemented AmeriCorps for 20 years. AmeriCorps has been an integral part of our vision to promote economic opportunities and collaborations with a focus on early childhood development and entrepreneurs. Over the past 27 years, we have become well known for our strong leadership, strategic focus and collaborations that leverage local assets for sustainable economic and community development.

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The LEAP Initiative is an integral part of how SMIF delivers on its mission of building tomorrow's workforce by supporting early childhood development. As evidenced in this application, early investment in building key competencies (i.e., SEL, literacy) produces the best return in terms of a skilled and productive local workforce.

Toward this end, SMIF runs a portfolio of nine programs devoted to preparing preschoolers for school success. These programs include home visits, parent training, early literacy, family literacy, early-learning computer training and STEM activities, and the implementation of a network of early childhood providers. Our early learning initiatives affect 7424 children and families each year. Since 1986, SMIF has invested \$11 million in its early childhood programs.

MANAGEMENT. Primary contact for this grant application is SMIF President/CEO Tim Penny, a former Congressman who has led this organization since 2007. His background in politics and public affairs helps to advance SMIF's key interests, including, early childhood development and economic development -- areas with the biggest growth potential for the region and the greatest impact on the future economy.

Vice President/COO Brian Conzemius, who has worked with the AmeriCorps program for 14 years, providing fiscal and compliance oversight. Senior Program Officer RaeJean Hansen, 20 years with SMIF, oversees the LEAP program and Program Director. SMIF's 15-person Board of Trustees provides fiscal and programmatic oversight and conducts early childhood advocacy. SMIF draws from board expertise, including that of Board Member June Reineke, an early childhood expert on faculty of the University of Minnesota Winona Early Childhood Department and Director of the Maxwell Childhood Center on campus. Board member, Dave Fisk, was International Director of the Ypsilanti, MI High/Scope Foundation, the nonprofit group responsible for the Perry Preschool Project -- a pioneering study, in its 50th year, documenting the sustained impact of early childhood education over the lifetime of one cohort of individuals.

The support of the four staff mentioned above is accounted for within our administrative budget line item are not listed separately on the budget .

STAFFING. Secondary contact is Program Director Barbara Gunderson, who has successfully led

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SMIF's AmeriCorps program for 13 years. Barbara is responsible for day-to-day operations of the program across participating sites, including program fidelity, training, and outcomes. She selects member applicants, runs monthly training meetings, coaches members, and consults with site partners to reach grant compliance and program goals. With 28 years of experience managing programs and leading groups within nonprofit and government sectors, she is a resilient troubleshooter, creative thinker and strategist who designs programs that deliver excellence. She has a BS in Sociology from University of Wisconsin-LaCrosse, a Mini-MBA in Nonprofit Management from St. Thomas University, Minnesota, and certifications in facilitation, coaching and leadership.

Program Associate Lynn Smith leverages her experience as a former preschool teacher and effective administration within the LEAP program. Now in her fourth year, she assists the Program Director in member and site recruitment; program record maintenance; Reading Rocks! book distribution; meeting logistics; and translating educational resources for classroom use. She has an Elementary Education degree from St. Thomas University, Minnesota.

GRANT MANAGEMENT. Finance Coordinator Bonita Sommers has monitored the LEAP budget and administered member benefits for 11 years.

SMIF has 27 years of successful experience managing other Federal grants: USDA Rural Development Fund, Disaster Revolving Fund and a Small Business Development Fund with loan assets over \$2.7 million dollars.

SMIF has a diversified funding stream that includes: The McKnight Foundation, Southwest Foundation, and ServeMinnesota Commission 27%; Endowment Earnings 23%; In-Kind Donations 13%; Business Contributions, including Capstone Publishers 12%; Loan Revenues and Fees 12%; Federal Govt. including US Small Business Administration 9%; Individual Donors 8%; and Local Government 3%.

SMIF received competitive funding each of the last six LEAP years totaling \$1,645,073. This represents 7% of SMIF's budget during the last six years.

b. Compliance and Accountability: SMIF hasn't had any compliance issues in 20 years. We have met

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ServeMinnesota's risk standards and satisfied external auditors for over two decades. We ensure compliance through comprehensive training and timely site visits and staff meetings. We review prohibited activities in program orientations and reinforce compliance throughout the service term.

SMIF finance and program staff are trained and experienced in preventing and detecting compliance issues. Staff has an average 13 years professional experience and 10 years implementing AmeriCorps contracts. Annual training keeps staff abreast of changes to prevent issues by incorporating updated compliance requirements into site contracts, member and site training, and checklists used by the Program Director for site visits.

The LEAP Director attends all ServeMinnesota meetings and shares compliance updates with staff. SMIF holds itself accountable through bi-weekly staff meetings to review program implementation, activities, compliance, and planning meetings at key program benchmarks: recruitment kick off, beginning of program, and year-end exit.

d. Past Performance: In the first two years of the current three-year grant cycle, member assessments exceeded performance measure goal of 80% of children (who started and finished 9 months of intervention) demonstrating gains in social emotional school readiness. In Year One, 276 (98%) of 282 children and in Year Two, 211 (95%) of 222 children demonstrated gains in Teaching Strategies Gold Assessment for social-emotional school readiness. SMIF anticipates that 95% of children currently enrolled in LEAP interventions will demonstrate gains for school readiness.

Our commitment to refine and improve SEL tools members use has undoubtedly contributed to our success to increase child outcomes from 74% average proficiency in 2008-2011 to 97% average proficiency in 2011-2013. We review progress on assessments and develop member skills to build confidence and fidelity. Based on member and site feedback, we made changes to allow members to focus on SEL skill-building and routine reading in 1:1 and small group interactions. We heard feedback that we were spreading our members too thin, with too broad an array of tasks that was ultimately taking away from their effectiveness in working with children in the classroom.

SMIF has met or exceeded enrollment goals every year from 2008 and is currently in full compliance. The organization has worked to improve retention rates resulting in an increase in 2012 by 20% over

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2008 (92% vs 71%).

Members who did not complete service terms fell into three broad categories: mismatched to site, family matters, or financial hardship. SMIF has integrated more explicit instruction on requirements and eligibility of benefits into the screening process, and is more closely monitoring members' paperwork.

a. Continuous Improvement. The Program Director solicits program feedback in several ways: (1) from members at monthly meetings and through written service reflection exercises; (2) from teachers and site supervisors in surveys administered each Fall, Winter and Spring; (3) from site partners as part of monthly email blasts; (4) through observations at annual site visits; (5) from members through a site evaluation; and (6) member mid-year and year-end performance evaluations. LEAP uses the CLASS to assess member skill level. Developed by researchers at the University of Virginia, this tool provides a framework for teachers observing classroom interactions so that members can understand and improve their practices. The LEAP Director specifically uses the social-emotional portion of the tool to engage teacher/member conversations to provide feedback, encourage collaboration, and improve skill development.

LEAP members assess child progress on SEL measures three times a year using the Teaching Strategies Gold 36-Indicators of Progress for Social-Emotional School Readiness. A LEAP document created from research and best practices, it measures student progress along 36 indicators for SEL school readiness. Students demonstrating all indicators on this scale meet SEL domain indicators for school readiness.

This Social-Emotional School Readiness Progress Report is reviewed by the Site Supervisor and classroom teachers, who compare the member assessment with their own. LEAP program staff will facilitate a discussion with members about the outcomes per indicator at both benchmark and mid-year assessment, encouraging members to brainstorm strategies and set goals to improve children's proficiency.

As we complete the final year of the current grant cycle, LEAP staff will prepare a report on best practices for building SEL skills in preschools, supporting teachers and assisting schools districts with

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closing the achievement gap for school readiness. We are evaluating how student growth proceeds from the beginning to the end of the year and whether "sticking points" exist that might require a change or intensification of strategy. We are also adding parent engagement metrics, in hopes of correlating whether increased parent involvement accelerates SEL skills acquisition.

We continue to use benchmark data to assess whether members are effective, children are acquiring skills and improving classroom experience for teachers and all students. We use CLASS to determine program fidelity and incorporate metrics and stakeholder feedback into our continuous improvement processes. Currently SMIF is looking at LEAP data to determine whether the model can be expanded to preschools elsewhere in the state or into K-12 schools in response to expressions of interest from other Community Action Councils in the state.

### **Cost Effectiveness and Budget Adequacy**

a. Cost-Effectiveness and Budget Adequacy: SMIF is committed to AmeriCorps and seeks to sustain its current portfolio of 20 FTE. The cost per member is \$27,983, inclusive of \$16,317 in matching funds. Communities across Southern Minnesota benefit through the program's leverage of additional resources sites need to strengthen family connections, early-learning environments, and social-emotional skills in high-need populations. Specific benefits include free books and at-home libraries, family literacy training and support, classroom management assistance for teachers, and improved school-readiness skills for five-year-olds entering the K-12 system -- benefits that are not being offered to this population through any other program.

SMIF expects that AmeriCorps costs will increase by 5% during each of the three years of this contract period, and has a written sustainability plan to raise state, local and private funding for both the match and the projected increased expenses. SMIF's ability to raise funds is well-documented: In its last fiscal year, SMIF raised almost \$1 million for early childhood programs from local businesses and individuals.

SMIF has established a Youth Trust Fund as an endowment to ensure the sustainability of its critical early childhood programming, including the LEAP program. The Youth Trust Fund's current value is \$1.9 million. This is an increase of 26% over last year, attributable in part to SMIF's vigorous, on-going fundraising efforts and strategies. The board has also committed over the 3 years of the new grant to make up any shortfalls in funding for the AmeriCorps program from operational funds.

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## Evaluation Summary or Plan

### C. Evaluation Plan

AmeriCorps LEAP Initiative's Theory of Change is that by helping preschoolers to develop social and emotional skills, these children will develop the foundation for self-regulation, critical thinking, and executive function that are crucial to school readiness and later academic success.

AmeriCorps LEAP Initiative's program evaluation design targets early childhood partner sites serving at-risk, under-resourced families. LEAP members are matched to classrooms identified with the highest disruptive preschool behaviors by children who are not on an Individual Education Plan. Our central idea is that early, targeted interventions will improve social-emotional proficiencies of preschoolers and increase their school readiness.

Key research questions:

\*Do preschoolers receiving AmeriCorps LEAP Interventions significantly increase their social-emotional proficiency?

\*Do preschoolers (by classroom) served by the LEAP members increase their social-emotional proficiency when compared to students (by classroom) who do not?

Research Methodology:

We will use two approaches to evaluate the effectiveness of our intervention strategies.

1. We will measure the progress of social-emotional learning (SEL) of individual preschoolers receiving one-on-one interventions. Interventions include evidence-based tools (various TACSEI visual cues and MindUp sensory activities) that practice calm, focus, and decision making.

Progress on the effectiveness of these interventions will be measured using Creative Curriculum's Teaching Strategies Gold 36-Indicators of Social-Emotional Proficiency for school readiness.

Members will assess each preschooler 1) at initiation of interventions for a baseline, 2) mid-point in the year, and 3) at the conclusion of the academic year. Data Analysis will compare each student at the beginning assessment period and at the end to track their progress on social-emotional developmental indicators for school readiness.

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While these assessments measure the number of preschoolers who make gains or meet targets, they do represent a couple of limitations. Even with teacher review of LEAP member preschool assessments, there is the possibility of bias. Further, this approach allows us to only consider preschoolers that receive individual LEAP interventions. Assessments are not done on preschoolers who do not receive individual one-on-one LEAP intervention.

2. We will measure social-emotional development within classrooms as a whole. The Teaching Strategies Gold 36-Indicators of Social-Emotional Proficiency for school readiness is an assessment method used in several key AmeriCorps LEAP Partner Sites. Several of these sites track this information over the course of a program year within overall school readiness reporting data. We will assess that information for classrooms that had an AmeriCorps member and for those who did not. This side by side comparison will confirm the validity of the previous approach by reducing the possibility of bias.

There are two limitations to this approach. Only selected Partner Sites have the infrastructure to track the information provided by the Teaching Strategies Gold 36-Indicators of Social-Emotional Proficiency Assessment so that it may be analyzed by classroom. Additionally, not all Partner Sites use this approach. Others use work sampling, observation, or other approaches to assess students' development on social-emotional issues.

Targeted Outcomes to be measured:

\*Through baseline, mid-year and year-end assessments we will find that 80% of 200 preschool children who complete 9-months of LEAP interventions demonstrate gains or meet the targets in social-emotional development that indicate school readiness.

\*Teachers will report that preschoolers receiving SEL training demonstrate significantly less oppositional or disruptive behaviors in the classroom

\*Participating sites, as evidenced by site staff feedback, report that children with improved preschool SEL skills enhance the learning environment for all children

\*75% of 200 parents engage in family reading and bonding activities as evidenced by reading logs

\*75% of 200 parents report that increased reading in the home has helped prepare their child for school success.

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### Data Collection:

Program staff has created all forms to be implemented and will collect data from LEAP members and Site Partners throughout the service term. Grant outcomes and required data collection processes are clearly stated in site applications and contracts and member agreements. LEAP program staff will review data forms and collection during a joint LEAP member and site supervisor meeting. The Program Associate will enter and track all data collected for Program Director's review and program reports.

Periodic review and analysis will occur at baseline, mid-year and year-end to adjust strategies and intervention. We will use benchmark data to assess whether our members are being effective, whether children are acquiring skills, and whether these activities are improving the classroom experience for the teachers and all students.

### Amendment Justification

NA

### Clarification Summary

CLARIFICATION 2014

Response 4.8.2014

#### 1) Budget Clarification Items

##### a) Section III - Administrative Costs: Corporation Fixed Amount

The calculation has been adjusted using Sums of Section I & II x .0526 x .60 formula

##### b) CCR Registration scheduled to expire 1/21/2015:

Brian Conzemius, Vice President/CFO, is Southern Minnesota Initiative Foundation's primary point of contact (POC) for the System for Award Management (SAM), and will renew and revalidate SAM registration prior to the expiration date of 1/21/2015.

#### 2) Programmatic Clarification Items

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a) How members deliver social-emotional learning (SEL) to children:

Members serve at sites for 7-8 hours per day, Monday through Friday (the exception would be for our monthly Corps meetings and service events that are held on Fridays).

Their interaction and delivery of SEL interventions with children is ongoing throughout the daily classroom timeframe 2x per day: in a morning and an afternoon class period.

Members utilize specific and relevant SEL tools for Arrival, Breakfast, Circle Time, Transitions, Free Play, Lunch, Circle Time, Transitions, and Departure. Throughout each 3-hr. preschool class timeframe, LEAP members are imbedding and modeling with every interaction and/or are deliberate with a planned strategy and learning with each 1:1 and intentional small group activity. Members will also be sharing SEL techniques at periodic early evening parent meetings and/or family service events associated with their site. Parent meetings run 2-3 hours in length if dinner is included and involve a child activity. Family events are scheduled after school or on a Saturday and range from 3 to 5 hours in length. Members focus on connecting and building positive relationships with parents at these events, present information on school readiness and lead family activities. Members send SEL activities and information home with each of six Reading Rocks! book gifts. Members also participate in school conferences with the teacher to meet parents and review each child's progress in SEL skill development.

b) Grant Award Start and Member Enrollment Period Start:

Grant Start Date: August 1, 2014

(Service Year August 1, 2014 - July 31, 2015)

Member Enrollment Period: August 1, 2014 up until orientation August 18-21, 2014; and ongoing through CNCS final enrollment date if we haven't reached 20 FTE by program orientation retreat August 18, 2014.

3) Strategic Engagement Slots Clarification

a) Percentage of Slots Targeted to Recruiting Members with Disabilities:

Our program casts a wide net for qualifying candidates regardless of abilities. Our applications to sites and members, as well as all marketing material, state this goal. For the past 5-6 years, 15-20% of our

## Narratives

Corps, each service year, possessed an unseen disability such as anxiety disorder, social phobia, or depression. To reach the most diverse Corps as possible each year, we are intentional with selecting the most diverse candidates with the skills we need for our LEAP positions from our applicant pool. Announcements are directed to our regional partners which include nonprofits and workforce centers that support individuals in transition who have disabilities.

b) Request for Additional Slots for Members with Disabilities:

No Requests will be made at this time.

4) MSY with No Program Funds Attached Clarification

No Requests will be made at this time.

5) Healthcare Clarification Items

a) Name of Health Insurance Provider we are planning on using:

Corps Network/Summit America

b) How we selected this provider:

We are planning to keep our current provider, Corps Network/Summit America. We have used, and been pleased, with this provider for several years.

We participated in their informational call March 6th where they outlined the steps they are taking to meet Affordable Care Act requirements.

Corps Network/Summit America is working to secure an affordable option to continue coverage to AmeriCorps programs past the current service term.

c) Does our proposed budget for member health care provide for Minimum Essential Coverage?

Not at this time. Our budget for 100% member health care coverage reflects the current monthly provider costs (Corps Network/Summit America). Corps Network/Summit America is in process to get compliant with the Affordable Care Act by securing a national insurer for Minimum Essential Coverage.

Our program will be providing the options to all applicant enrollees during the interview process.

These options include: 1) staying on a parent plan if one exists, 2) selecting basement plan from

## Narratives

Public Exchanges, 3) selecting Medicaid based on \$12,100 living allowance, or 4) signing up for LEAP health benefit (which will be Corps Network/Summit America or alternate grantee plan).

d) What Adjustment to your budget is necessary in order for you to provide Minimum Essential Coverage?

SMIF will adjust its AmeriCorps LEAP Initiative budget to meet any increased cost for provider monthly premiums and SMIFs obligations under CNCS rules for providing member health care benefits. Corps Network/Summit America is projecting a monthly premium increase maximum of \$200. SMIF will increase its cash match to cover the increased health care cost.

e) Additional Comments

We are waiting for follow-up communication from Corps Network/Summit America in June. Corps Network/Summit America is committed to meeting Minimum Essential Coverage so it can continue as a primary AmeriCorps health care provider. They have two plans in place:

Plan A - To get compliant with Affordable Care Act (working with a national insurer so they can qualify as MEC.)

If this isn't feasible,

Plan B - For Minimum Essential Coverage they will have two policies; a short term limited duration to get rid of maximum on preventive and pre-existing conditions and a Stop loss - or excess - to cover claims per cause maximum and seek HHH Designation as MEC provider.

### Continuation Changes

NA

### Grant Characteristics